

Makes my heart beat like a drum

"Melting through the cracks in my hands

I guess I held on for too long."

Hong

The art studio hummed with the particular chaos of deadline energy.

Around me, canvases leaned against walls in various states of completion. Paint-stained tarps covered the floor in patches. The smell of turpentine and acrylic hung in the air, sharp and familiar, mixing with the coffee someone had brewed too strong in the corner. Students moved between stations with the focused intensity of people running out of time—eleven days until the exhibition, and some of them were still blocking in base colors on pieces that should have been finished weeks ago.

I sat in front of my three paintings, headphones on, music playing at a volume that should have drowned out everything. But I could still hear the murmur beneath the bass line—voices and footsteps and the occasional burst of laughter from someone whose work was going better than they'd expected. The sounds filtered through like water through cracks in a wall, impossible to fully block out.

My notebook lay open on my lap, pages blank except for a date scrawled in the corner. I was supposed to be writing artist statements. Titles for the pieces. Brief descriptions that would help viewers understand what they were looking at, what I'd been trying to say, why any of this mattered.

The cursor on the metaphorical page blinked at me, patient and accusatory.

Name: _____

Description: _____

I stared at the paintings.

The first one was the largest—two figures standing at a threshold, one in shadow and one in light, their hands almost touching across the divide. I'd spent weeks on the quality of that almost. The space between their fingers, charged and empty at the same time. The way light bled into darkness at the edges, suggesting that the boundary wasn't as absolute as it appeared.

What was I supposed to call it? "Almost Touching"? "The Space Between"? Everything I thought of sounded pretentious or too obvious or not obvious enough.

The second painting was smaller, more intimate. A single figure curled in on themselves, surrounded by soft things—blankets and cushions and the suggestion

of stuffed animals at the edges of the frame. But instead of looking protected, the figure looked trapped. Or maybe they looked safe. I couldn't tell anymore. That ambiguity had felt intentional when I was painting it, but now it just felt like confusion.

And the third...

The third was the one I couldn't look at for too long.

A mirror, rendered with obsessive attention to the way glass reflected and distorted. And in the mirror, a face that was mine and not mine—features slightly shifted, expression caught in the moment between recognition and estrangement. The background was empty, deliberately so. Just the figure and its reflection, confronting each other across the silver surface.

I'd painted it at three in the morning, two months ago, after one of those nights when sleep wouldn't come and my thoughts kept circling back to the same questions. What's wrong with me? Why can't I just be normal? What if everyone figures out that I'm broken?

Now I was supposed to give it a name. Write a description that strangers would read while standing in front of it, trying to understand what I'd been feeling when I made it.

How did you explain something you barely understood yourself?

The hour passed.

My notebook remained blank.

Around me, other students came and went—checking on their pieces, making last-minute adjustments, conferring with professors about hanging positions and lighting requirements. Someone asked me a question about the exhibition schedule; I answered on autopilot, the words coming from somewhere that didn't require my full attention.

The paintings watched me, waiting to be named.

And underneath the anxiety about titles and descriptions, something else churned. Something heavier, older, more complicated.

Nut.

His name had been living in my chest for days now, pressing against my ribs like something trying to escape. Ever since Saturday—ever since I'd sat in Lego's pastel bedroom with tears on my face and finally said the words I'd been afraid to speak for years.

I think I'm asexual.

The admission had cracked something open in me. Not broken—cracked, like an egg. Something that needed to break for what was inside to emerge. Lego had held me while I cried. Had thanked me for trusting him. Had said, with that particular wisdom he carried despite his nineteen years: He deserves to know who you are. The real you.

And now I was here, in a studio full of art that was supposed to represent my inner life, paralyzed by the weight of everything I hadn't said to the person who mattered most.

Nut had been patient. So patient. Weeks of lunches and coffee dates and late-night texts that I answered too slowly because I was afraid of what might happen if I let myself respond with the enthusiasm I actually felt. He'd asked questions and listened to answers and shown up at the exhibition prep yesterday with food he'd bought because he knew I'd forget to eat.

He was kind. He was genuine. He looked at me like I was worth looking at, like my silences were interesting rather than awkward, like my sharpness was charming rather than off-putting. And every day I didn't tell him the truth, I was building a relationship on a foundation of omission.

What if the truth is too much?

What if telling him ruins everything before it even starts?

The questions spiraled, familiar and exhausting. I'd been asking them for years—about every relationship, every connection, every person who got close enough to notice that something was different about me. I'd developed strategies for deflection. Excuses for why things never progressed past a certain point. Walls built from humor and distance and the particular armor of someone who'd rather leave first than be left.

But Nut wasn't like the others.

Nut didn't push. He just... stayed. Present and patient and impossibly hopeful, like he was willing to wait forever for me to figure out what I wanted.

And what I wanted—what I was terrified to admit I wanted—was to let him in.

I've spent years trying to be something I'm not.

The thought surfaced clearly, cutting through the noise.

Pushing away everyone who got too close because I knew eventually they'd want something I couldn't give.

I looked at the third painting. The mirror. The reflection that was me and not me.

But what if I just... told them?

What if I let people decide for themselves whether they wanted to stay?

The meeting ended without me having written a single word. I handed in the paintings with their names—still pending, still blank, a problem for tomorrow's version of myself. The coordinator gave me a look that suggested she wasn't surprised, that she'd seen artists freeze before deadlines a hundred times. I nodded acknowledgment and gathered my things.

The hallway outside the studio was a river of motion.

Students rushed past carrying boxes and rolled canvases. Someone nearly collided with me while wrestling a sculpture into a cart. Voices overlapped in a dozen conversations—installation logistics, lighting concerns, the particular panic of people who'd underestimated how long everything would take.

I moved through it all with my headphones still on, music creating a bubble of relative quiet. The people who brushed against me seemed to leave traces—echoes of their energy, fragments of their stress and excitement. I absorbed it without meaning to, the way I absorbed everything. Observer's curse. Always watching, always cataloging, always outside the chaos even when I was standing in the middle of it.

The path to the dance building was familiar. I'd walked it dozens of times over the past months, usually to meet Lego after his classes or rehearsals. The campus shifted around me as I moved—from the art quad with its paint-splattered sidewalks to the performance wing with its different kind of creative energy.

When I pushed through the doors, I found a similar scene but translated into movement instead of color. Dancers stretched in corners. Someone practiced a sequence in the hallway, their reflection ghosting across a window. Music leaked from practice rooms, overlapping genres creating an accidental soundtrack.

I walked toward the back, passing rooms with large windows and mirrors—each one offering glimpses of bodies in motion, the particular grace of people who'd trained their flesh to speak languages most of us couldn't even pronounce. Some students sat against the walls outside, watching or waiting or lost in their own worlds.

The rooms got smaller as I went deeper into the building. More private. The kind of spaces reserved for soloists or small groups, for work that required concentration without an audience.

The last room, near the emergency exit, was where I found Lego.

He was dancing.

Through the glass window in the door, I could see him—headphones on, completely absorbed, moving through choreography that looked both precise and exhausted. Sweat darkened the edges of his gray outfit, a fitted combination of shorts and cropped t-shirt that showed how hard he'd been working. The cardigan over it was sheer, black, floating slightly with each movement like a shadow that couldn't quite keep up.

His hair was pinned up in a small bun, secured with what looked like a pencil. Practical and careless at the same time. So completely Lego.

He caught sight of me through the window and his face transformed. The focus of performance melted into recognition, exhaustion giving way to genuine warmth. His smile reached his eyes—tired but real, the kind of expression you couldn't fake if you tried.

I waved.

He waved back, then held up one finger—give me a minute—and finished whatever sequence he'd been working on. His movements slowed, became less choreographed and more functional as he wound down. Then he grabbed a water bottle and a towel and made his way to the door.

When he opened it, the smell of exertion and studio air followed him out.

"P'Hong." His voice was slightly breathless, cheeks flushed. "You found me."

"You weren't exactly hiding."

He grinned, gesturing for me to come in. "I've been in here for three hours. I'm pretty sure the janitor thinks I've taken up permanent residence."

I followed him into the practice room. It was smaller than I'd expected from the outside—just enough space for one dancer to move freely, with mirrors on two walls and a barre along a third. The floor was scuffed from years of use, marked with tape in places that probably meant something choreographically significant.

Lego sank to the floor in a controlled collapse, his back against the mirror, legs stretched out in front of him. The exhaustion was more visible now—the slight tremor in his hands as he uncapped his water bottle, the way his breathing was still slightly ragged even as it began to slow.

"The showcase piece?" I asked, settling onto the floor beside him.

"Yeah." He took a long sip, then pressed the cold bottle against his forehead. "It's... coming together. Sort of. I think."

"You think?"

"I know the choreography." He laughed, but there was something underneath it—frustration, maybe, or something darker. "I've known it for a week now. My body can do it without my brain. But it still doesn't feel like mine, you know? It was someone else's dance. Someone else's story. I'm just... borrowing it."

I thought about my paintings. The way they held pieces of me that I couldn't articulate in words. The way putting them in a gallery would feel like exposing something private, even though the viewers wouldn't know exactly what they were seeing.

"Maybe that's okay," I said. "Maybe art doesn't have to feel like yours to be good. Maybe sometimes you're just the vessel."

Lego considered this, his head tilting back against the mirror. The pencil holding his bun caught the fluorescent light.

"Maybe." He didn't sound convinced. "But I wanted... I didn't want to perform until William could come. Did I tell you that?"

"On the phone. When you called."

"Right." He was quiet for a moment, lost in something. "He and his mother used to watch me. Every recital, every showcase, every stupid thing I did on a stage. They'd be in the front row, and she'd bring flowers, and he'd look so proud even when I screwed up." His voice cracked slightly on the last words. "Now she's gone and he can't leave his apartment and I'm supposed to dance like it doesn't matter that the two people who always showed up won't be there."

I didn't say anything. Sometimes silence was more honest than comfort.

Lego wiped his face with the towel—sweat or maybe tears, impossible to tell. When he spoke again, his voice was steadier.

"But P'Tui said he's coming. And you're coming. And Est. And your sister and Kavin." He managed a smile that was almost convincing. "The circle's getting bigger, right? Even when people leave, new people join."

"That's what they tell me."

"Do you believe it?"

I thought about the question. About the people who had entered and exited my life over the years—family and friends and almost-relationships that never quite became real. About Tui and Est and Lego himself, who'd somehow become the closest thing I had to siblings despite the fact that we'd met through a tattoo studio and a breakdown and the complicated web of William's implosion.

"I'm starting to," I said finally. "Believe it, I mean. It's hard to argue with evidence."

Lego's smile warmed into something more genuine. "Good. Because you're stuck with me now. I've decided."

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely. You cried on my shoulder and ate my strawberry cake. That makes us bonded for life. It's in the friendship charter."

"There's a charter?"

"I just invented it. Article One: Crying plus cake equals eternal connection."

I laughed—actually laughed, the sound escaping before I could contain it. Something about Lego's particular brand of absurdity always caught me off guard, slipping past my defenses before I could raise them.

"Fine," I said. "Eternal connection it is."

"Excellent." He took another sip of water, then turned to look at me with those eyes that saw too much. "Now. What's happening with you? Because you showed up in my practice room with the face of someone whose thoughts are eating them alive."

I told him everything.

Not the confession again—he already knew that part. But the rest of it. The blank pages in my notebook. The paintings waiting to be named. The way I'd sat in that studio for an hour, paralyzed by questions that had nothing to do with art and everything to do with the weight I'd been carrying for years.

"I keep thinking about what you said," I admitted. The floor was hard beneath me, but I didn't want to move. Moving would break something. "About him deserving to know who I am. The real me."

Lego listened. He was good at that—better than most people twice his age. He didn't interrupt or offer solutions or try to fix anything. He just held space, present and patient, the way someone had probably never held space for him.

"I've spent so long being careful," I continued. The words came easier now that they'd started. "Measuring every interaction. Keeping track of how close someone was getting, how much they might want, how to redirect before they started expecting things I couldn't give." I shook my head. "It's exhausting. Pretending to be normal. Pretending I'm just 'not interested' instead of fundamentally different."

"You're not broken," Lego said quietly. "You know that, right?"

"I know." Did I? Sometimes. On good days. "But knowing and believing are different things."

"Yeah." His voice was soft, holding weight. "I understand that better than you might

think."

Of course he did. Lego carried his own versions of that gap—the space between knowing you deserved love and believing anyone would actually stay to give it.

"I want to tell him," I said. The words felt like a decision, even though I'd said them before. "Nut. I want to tell him everything. Not because I'm ready or because I'm not scared anymore, but because..." I searched for the right phrase. "Because I'm more scared of never trying than I am of being rejected."

Lego nodded slowly, understanding in his expression. "That's brave."

"It doesn't feel brave."

"The brave things usually don't." He set down his water bottle and turned to face me more fully, his legs crossing in front of him. "What's the worst that could happen? If you tell him?"

I'd thought about this. Had been thinking about it for days, running scenarios, preparing for disaster.

"He could decide he wants someone who can give him more. Someone without all the complications. He could be kind about it—say he understands, that it's not my fault—but still leave. And then I'd know that even the kindest people have limits."

"And the best thing that could happen?"

That was harder to articulate. I'd spent so long bracing for the worst that the best felt like a fantasy I didn't dare name.

"He could... stay," I said finally. "He could hear all of it and decide I'm still worth being with. He could be patient while we figure out what a relationship looks like for us. He could—" I had to stop, my throat tightening.

"He could love you," Lego finished gently. "The real you. The whole you. Not in spite of who you are, but because of it."

Tears pricked at my eyes. I blinked them back, annoyed at myself for being this emotional.

"That seems like a lot to hope for."

"Hope is supposed to feel like a lot." Lego's voice was impossibly kind. "That's how you know it matters."

We sat with that for a moment, the practice room quiet around us. The mirrors reflected our figures—two people on a floor, leaning toward understanding.

"Thank you," I said. "For listening. For not telling me what to do."

"You already know what to do." Lego smiled, and despite the exhaustion and the sweat and the weight of his own upcoming performance, the expression was luminous. "You've known for a while, I think. You just needed someone to sit with you while you figured out how to say it out loud."

"Is that what you've been doing? Sitting with me?"

"It's what friends do." He shrugged, the gesture making his sheer cardigan shift on his shoulders. "Article Two of the friendship charter: Sitting with each other while we figure things out."

"That charter's getting extensive."

"It's a living document."

I laughed again, lighter this time. Something had loosened in my chest—not resolved, exactly, but released. The weight was still there, but it felt more manageable. Like something I could actually carry.

"I'm going to tell Nut." I said, and this time the words came out confident. Not bravado or desperation, just decision. Simple and clear.

Lego's smile widened. "Good."

"I don't know when. Or how. But soon. Before the exhibition, maybe. So if it goes badly, I can—" I stopped myself, recognizing the old pattern. "No. Actually, it doesn't matter when. I'm going to tell him because he deserves to know. And because I deserve to be known."

"Yes." Lego reached out and squeezed my hand—a brief pressure, warm and deliberate. "You do."

We sat there for a while longer, the silence comfortable now instead of heavy. Through the window in the door, I could see the hallway gradually emptying as evening approached. The dance building was settling into its quieter hours.

"I should let you get back to practice." I said eventually.

"Probably." But Lego made no move to stand. "Or I could quit dance entirely and become a professional advice-giver. I'm clearly very good at it."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late. I'm already drafting my TED Talk. 'Emotional Wisdom from a Nineteen-Year-Old with Too Many Stuffed Animals.'"

"Catchy title."

"I thought so."

We did finally stand, eventually, stretching out muscles that had stiffened from sitting on a hard floor. Lego walked me to the door of the practice room, his movements looser now that he'd had time to cool down.

"Good luck with the paintings," he said. "The names will come when they're ready."

"You think?"

"Art knows its own truth." He tilted his head, considering. "Or that's what my dance instructor says when we can't figure out what a piece is about. It sounds profound, anyway."

"Very profound. I'll put it on a poster."

"Please do. I want royalties."

I was still smiling when I left the dance building, the evening air cool against my face. The campus had quieted from the chaos of afternoon—fewer people rushing, more walking with purpose toward dinners or study sessions or the hundred small destinations that made up student life.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. A message from Nut:

How's the exhibition prep going?

I stopped walking, thumb hovering over the keyboard. The question was simple. The answer could be simple too—fine, busy, lots to do.

But I was tired of simple. Tired of safe. Tired of carefully calibrated responses that kept everyone at exactly the distance I'd determined was survivable.

Can we talk soon? I typed. In person. I have something I need to tell you.

The response came almost immediately:

Of course. Whenever you're ready. I'm here.

I'm here.

Two words. So small. So enormous.

I pocketed my phone and kept walking, but something had changed. The weight in my chest was still present, but it had shifted—from burden to possibility. From secret to story I was about to tell.

Lego was right. I already knew what to do.

And for the first time in longer than I could remember, I was ready to do it.

The message sat in my drafts for eleven minutes before I sent it. I'd typed and

deleted it four times, each version slightly different—more casual, more formal, more honest, less terrifying. In the end, I settled on something simple. Direct. The kind of message that left no room for misinterpretation and nowhere to hide.

Hong: Are you free?

My thumb hovered over the send button for another thirty seconds. The cursor blinked, patient and accusatory. In my chest, my heart was doing something complicated—beating too fast, then too slow, then skipping entirely in a way that probably wasn't medically advisable.

I pressed send.

The read receipt appeared almost immediately. Then the typing indicator. Then—

Nut: Always free for you! Should I be worried?

Nut: Actually, don't answer that. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out.

Nut: Where do you want to meet?

I stared at the messages, something in my throat loosening. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out. Such a simple statement. Such an enormous promise, made casually, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Hong: There's a café Lego recommended. I'll send you the location.

Nut: Perfect! See you in an hour?

Hong: See you then.

I set down my phone and pressed my palms against my eyes, breathing through the sudden wave of panic that threatened to overwhelm me.

One hour.

In one hour, I would tell Nut the truth about who I was.

And everything would change.

The café was exactly the kind of place Lego would love. Soft colors everywhere—pale pink walls, mint green accents, tables in various shades of cream and blush. Plants cascaded from shelves and hung from the ceiling in macramé holders, their leaves catching the afternoon light that filtered through the large windows. The whole space felt like stepping into someone's carefully curated dream of what comfort should look like.

I arrived twenty minutes early because I couldn't stand waiting anymore. The anxiety had become a physical presence, pressing against my ribs, making my skin

feel too tight for my body. Movement had helped—the walk here, the process of finding the café, the ritual of choosing a table.

I selected one in the far corner, near the window but partially obscured by a large fiddle leaf fig in a ceramic pot. Private without being isolated. Visible enough that Nut would be able to find me, hidden enough that I wouldn't feel exposed.

The menu was extensive—a riot of specialty drinks and elaborate desserts, each item photographed and described with the kind of detail that suggested someone had put real thought into this place. I scanned the tea section and felt something loosen in my chest when I recognized the names.

Jasmine. Osmanthus. Rose petal.

Lego's teas. The same varieties he'd given me as gifts, the same flowers that had bloomed in my morning cups for months now. He must have gotten them from here, or from the same supplier. Either way, seeing them on the menu felt like a sign—a reminder that I wasn't alone in this, that the connections I'd built over the past year were real and present, supporting me even when the people themselves weren't in the room.

I ordered an iced jasmine tea and a mango coconut cake that looked ridiculously fluffy in the menu photos. The server—a young woman with a kind smile and a name tag that read Ploy—didn't seem to notice or care that my hands were shaking slightly when I pointed to my selections.

And then I waited.

The minutes stretched like taffy, each one pulling longer than the last. I watched people come and go through the café's front door—couples holding hands, friends laughing over pastries, individuals absorbed in laptops or phones or the particular solitude of public spaces. Normal people living normal lives, unburdened by the kind of confession I was about to make.

What would they think if they knew? If they could see inside my head, into the years of confusion and shame and the particular loneliness of feeling fundamentally different from everyone around you?

I thought about my sister. About the night I'd told her, at sixteen, tears streaming down my face as I tried to explain something I didn't have words for yet. I think there's something wrong with me. Everyone else wants things and I just... don't. Not the way they do. Not the way I'm supposed to.

She'd held me while I cried. Had listened without interrupting. Had spent the next week researching, reading, learning vocabulary that neither of us had known existed. And then she'd come back to me with information and resources and the simple, devastating truth: There's nothing wrong with you. You're just different. And

different isn't broken.

I'd believed her. Eventually. Mostly. But believing something in the safety of family was different from trusting it in the wild uncertainty of romance.

Every relationship I'd attempted since then had ended the same way—with me pulling back, making excuses, finding reasons to leave before I had to explain. It was easier to be the one who walked away than to risk being the one who was walked away from.

But Nut hadn't let me walk away. He'd stayed. Persistent and patient and so genuinely interested in the person I actually was that I'd run out of excuses for keeping him at arm's length. And now I was sitting in a pastel café, waiting to tell him the truth, and the terror was so acute I could taste it.

The door opened.

Nut looked different out of his work clothes.

I was used to seeing him in professional attire—button-downs and slacks, the kind of careful presentation that said I take my job seriously. But today he was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, simple and comfortable, his whole energy shifted toward relaxation.

He spotted me immediately—his face lighting up with that characteristic smile, the one that crinkled the corners of his eyes and made him look like someone who had never experienced disappointment in his life. He waved as he made his way through the café, navigating around tables with the particular grace of someone who was always in motion.

"Hong!" He slid into the chair across from me, slightly breathless, his smile still firmly in place. "Great spot. I love places like this. Very cozy. Very... pastel."

"Lego recommended it."

"Of course he did." Nut glanced around appreciatively. "It looks like someone decorated it based on him."

"That's exactly what I thought."

We fell into the easy rhythm of ordering—Nut requesting an iced Americano and a cinnamon roll that was apparently fresh from the oven, steam still rising from its spiral center. The server brought everything with practiced efficiency, and for a few minutes we just ate.

The cake was as fluffy as it had looked in the photos. The tea was cool and floral, grounding me in my body. And across the table, Nut was consuming his cinnamon roll with obvious enjoyment, somehow managing to make eating pastry look like a

form of meditation.

We talked about nothing important. His morning. My exhibition prep. A new café he'd discovered near his office. The particular chaos of the current work project and the colleagues who were driving him slowly insane. It was comfortable. Normal. The kind of conversation we'd had dozens of times over the past months, building a foundation of familiarity that I'd been too afraid to name as something more. But underneath the words, the real conversation waited.

I could feel it pressing against my ribs, demanding to be spoken. The longer I delayed, the more the pressure built—a wave gathering strength before it broke. Finally, the plates were empty. The drinks were half-finished. The pauses between topics had grown longer, heavier with unspoken weight.

It was now or never.

"I need to tell you something."

The words came out steadier than I expected, given how my heart was trying to escape through my throat. I watched Nut's expression shift—the casual pleasantness giving way to something more focused, more present.

"Something that might change how you see me." I added, because I needed him to understand the stakes. Needed him to know this wasn't a casual revelation or a minor confession.

"Okay." Nut set down his coffee cup and leaned forward slightly, his whole attention on me. "I'm listening."

I'd rehearsed this moment. Had practiced the words in my head a hundred times, trying to find the right combination of syllables that would make this easier. But nothing had prepared me for the actual experience of sitting across from someone I cared about and preparing to expose the thing I'd hidden for so long.

"I'm asexual."

The word landed between us, small and enormous at the same time.

"I don't experience attraction the way most people do," I continued, the explanation tumbling out now that I'd started. "The physical stuff that everyone seems to want—I don't want it. Not in the same way. Not..." I struggled to find the right phrasing, the words that would make him understand without making it sound like a diagnosis or a condition. "It's not that something's wrong with me. It's just how I'm built. How I've always been."

I made myself look at him. Made myself watch his face as he processed what I'd said.

And what I saw there wasn't what I expected.

Not shock. Not disappointment. Not the careful blankness of someone preparing to deliver bad news gently.

Just attention. Focus. The particular stillness of someone who was genuinely listening.

"Okay." he said.

I blinked.

"Okay? That's it?"

"What did you expect me to say?"

The question was gentle, curious, completely lacking in accusation. He seemed genuinely interested in my answer—not defensive, not dismissive, just... present.

"I expected you to leave." The honesty scraped against my throat on the way out. "To realize I can't give you what you want."

Nut was quiet for a moment, his expression thoughtful. I watched him process—could almost see the gears turning behind his eyes as he took in what I'd said, considered it from different angles, formulated his response.

When he spoke, his voice was soft but certain.

"Hong." He leaned forward, his eyes holding mine. "I've been chasing you for months. Sending you cat pictures at midnight because I thought they might make you smile. Asking you to coffee every other day. Showing up at your exhibition prep with food you didn't ask for because I knew you'd forget to eat. I've done all of that because I like you. The person. The artist. The guy who pretends to be annoyed but actually laughs at my jokes when he thinks I'm not looking."

Something was happening in my chest. Something that felt like cracking and healing at the same time.

"If what you're telling me," Nut continued, "is that sex isn't part of the equation—okay. Then we figure out what is."

I stared at him.

The silence stretched between us, but it wasn't the uncomfortable kind. It was the kind of silence that came when something significant had been said and both people needed a moment to absorb it.

"You say that now," I managed finally. "But—"

"I'll say it tomorrow too." His voice was steady, unwavering. "And the day after. For as long as you need to hear it."

The words hit me like something physical. I'd been bracing for impact—for rejection, for careful disappointment, for the gentle letdown I'd imagined a thousand times. I'd been prepared for Nut to be kind about it, because he was kind about everything. Had been ready for him to say the right things while his eyes said something different. But this wasn't gentle letdown. This wasn't kindness masking disappointment.

This was just... acceptance. Simple and complete and so unexpected that I didn't know what to do with it.

"Can I ask—" Nut paused, something careful in his expression. "And you don't have to answer if you don't want to. Why didn't you tell me before?"

The question wasn't accusatory. Just curious. The voice of someone trying to understand something that mattered.

"Because I was afraid you'd leave."

The truth came out raw, unpolished, stripped of all the defenses I usually wrapped it in.

"I've been afraid of that since the beginning," I admitted. "Since the first time you asked me to coffee and I said no because I couldn't figure out how to explain why I was hesitating. I wanted—" I had to stop, had to swallow against the tightness in my throat. "I wanted to let you in. But every time I thought about telling you, I imagined your face changing. Imagined you realizing I wasn't worth the complication. That you could find someone easier, someone who wanted the things you wanted, someone who wouldn't need special consideration or different boundaries or—"

"Hong." Nut's voice cut through my spiral, gentle but firm. "Stop."

I stopped.

"I'm not leaving," he said. "Not because of this. Not because of anything you've told me. I've known for months that you were holding something back. I could see it—the way you'd get close and then pull away. The way you'd let yourself enjoy something and then immediately look for reasons to dismiss it. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it was there."

"And you stayed anyway?"

"I stayed because of it." He smiled, that genuine smile that I was beginning to recognize as something reserved for moments that mattered. "I stayed because whatever was making you careful was also making you brave. You could have just walked away. Could have ghosted me or given me a clear rejection. But you didn't."

You kept showing up, kept letting me in a little more each time, kept taking these tiny steps toward trusting me even when it scared you."

My eyes were stinging. I blinked rapidly, trying to maintain some semblance of composure.

"I don't expect you to believe me right away," Nut continued. "I know this isn't the kind of thing that gets fixed with one conversation. But I'm asking you to give me a chance. To let me prove that what I'm saying is true. That this—" he gestured between us— "is about wanting to be with you, not about wanting any particular thing from you."

"What if I never—"

"Then you never." His voice was simple, matter-of-fact. "And we figure out what we are instead. People have been building relationships on all kinds of foundations for all of human history. We're not the first people to need to figure out a different path, and we won't be the last."

The café had grown quieter around us.

The afternoon rush had passed, leaving scattered tables of customers absorbed in their own conversations, their own lives. The light through the windows had shifted toward the golden warmth of approaching evening. I sat there, across from this man who had just received the thing I'd been most afraid to share and responded with—not just acceptance, but curiosity. Interest. A willingness to understand that felt almost too good to be true.

"I don't know what to say." I admitted finally.

"You don't have to say anything." Nut's smile was soft. "This isn't a negotiation. You told me something important, and I heard it. That's enough for now."

"It doesn't feel like enough."

"What would feel like enough?"

I thought about the question. Really thought about it, instead of deflecting or overthinking or retreating into the familiar safety of sarcasm.

"I think..." I started slowly, finding the words as I spoke them. "I think what would feel like enough is knowing that you actually understand what I told you. Not just the word, but what it means. For me, specifically. For us, potentially."

"Then tell me." Nut settled back in his chair, his whole posture radiating I have time. "Tell me what you need me to understand."

So I did.

I told him about the years of confusion. About watching my peers develop crushes and desires that felt alien to me, like they were speaking a language I'd never learned. About trying to force myself to want things I didn't want, to feel things I didn't feel, because I thought that's what normal people did.

I told him about the relationships I'd sabotaged. The connections I'd cut short before they could get deep enough for the truth to matter. The particular loneliness of being surrounded by people who seemed to navigate romance effortlessly while I stood outside, watching through glass I couldn't break.

I told him about my sister, and the night I'd finally named what was different about me. About the research she'd done and the resources she'd found and the slow, painful process of learning to see myself as something other than broken.

And I told him about the fear. The ever-present terror that anyone I cared about romantically would eventually want more than I could give. That being with me would mean missing out on something essential. That loving me would be settling for less.

Nut listened to all of it.

He didn't interrupt. Didn't offer solutions or reassurances. Just listened with that complete attention that I was beginning to realize was one of his superpowers—the ability to make someone feel like they were the only person in the world who mattered.

When I finally ran out of words, the silence that followed wasn't empty. It was full—of understanding, of the space between us that had shifted into something new.

"Thank you," Nut said finally. "For trusting me with that."

"It wasn't easy."

"I know. That's why I'm thanking you."

He reached across the table and rested his hand near mine—not touching, just present. An offer rather than a demand.

"Can I tell you something now?" he asked.

I nodded.

"When I first met you—really met you, not just the surface level interactions—I knew there was something different about you. Not in a bad way. Just... different. The way you held yourself. The way you noticed things other people missed. The way you seemed to be constantly calculating something, weighing options, running scenarios in your head."

"That's just anxiety." I said dryly.

"Maybe. But I found it fascinating." His smile was rueful. "You were like a puzzle I wanted to solve. Which sounds terrible, actually. I don't mean—"

"I know what you mean."

"Good." He took a breath. "What I'm trying to say is that I didn't fall for you because I was imagining a future where you'd eventually be exactly what I expected. I fell for you because you were complicated and sharp and unexpectedly soft when you thought no one was watching. Because you cared about things deeply even when you pretended not to. Because being around you made me want to be more observant, more thoughtful, more... present."

His eyes held mine, steady and sincere.

"This thing you've told me—it doesn't change any of that. It adds context. Helps me understand parts of you I couldn't quite figure out before. But it doesn't make you less interesting or less worth pursuing. If anything, it makes me more sure that what I feel is real. Because now I know I wasn't falling for a projection. I was falling for you."

I don't remember deciding to cry. The tears just came—silent and warm, sliding down my cheeks before I could stop them. I tried to wipe them away, embarrassed by the display of emotion in public, but they kept falling.

"Hey." Nut's voice was gentle. "Hey, it's okay."

"I'm not sad." The words came out choked. "I don't know why I'm—"

"You don't have to know." He'd moved his hand closer to mine, and now I felt his fingers brush against my knuckles—light, questioning. I turned my hand over, and he took it. "Sometimes things are too big for explanations."

I held onto his hand like it was an anchor, like letting go would mean floating away into something I couldn't navigate.

"I've been so scared," I admitted. "For so long. I thought—if I told anyone, really told them, they'd see something broken. Something less than. Something not worth the trouble."

"You're not trouble."

"I know. I mean—I'm starting to know." I took a shaky breath. "Lego said something, when I told him. He said you deserved to know the real me. Not the version I thought you'd want, but the actual person I am. And I was terrified because what if the real me wasn't enough? What if the truth was that there wasn't anything there worth knowing?"

"Hong." Nut squeezed my hand. "Listen to me. What you just told me—about being asexual, about what that means for you—that's not an absence. It's not a lack. It's just information about who you are. And who you are is someone I want to know better. Someone I want to spend time with. Someone whose laugh makes me happy and whose opinions I actually care about and whose art makes me feel things I can't articulate."

He leaned forward, his expression earnest.

"I'm not going to pretend I have all the answers. I've never dated anyone who's asexual before. I don't know what that looks like in practice, what works and what doesn't. But I'm willing to figure it out. I'm willing to ask questions and listen to answers and adjust my expectations and learn. If you'll let me."

I looked at him—really looked, past the friendly smile and the easy energy to the person underneath. Someone patient enough to pursue me for months without demanding anything in return. Someone thoughtful enough to show up with food when I forgot to eat. Someone who, even now, was making this moment about my comfort rather than his own confusion.

"Okay." I said.

"Okay?"

"Okay, we can figure it out. Together."

The smile that broke across his face was like sunrise—slow at first, then overwhelming. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I managed a watery smile of my own. "But if you send me a cat picture in the next thirty seconds, I'm taking it back."

He laughed—a full, genuine sound that made the remaining tension in my chest dissolve.

"No cat pictures for at least thirty-one seconds. Got it."

"I'm serious."

"I can tell. That's what makes it funny."

We stayed in the café for another hour.

The conversation shifted—from the heavy truths I'd shared to lighter topics, the kind of back-and-forth that felt less like building something new and more like continuing something we'd already started. But there was a difference now. A freedom that hadn't been there before.

I could be honest about small things because I'd been honest about the big thing.

When Nut made a joke that I found genuinely funny, I laughed without trying to minimize it. When he asked about my exhibition, I told him how terrified I was without wrapping it in irony. When he described a situation at work that was frustrating him, I offered genuine sympathy instead of sarcastic commentary.

It was like someone had removed a filter I hadn't known I was using. The world seemed slightly brighter, slightly clearer, slightly more possible.

"I should probably head home," Nut said eventually, glancing at the time on his phone. "I have an early meeting tomorrow, and my responsible adult brain is starting to assert itself."

"That's a shame. Your irresponsible adult brain is more fun."

"They're both me." He grinned. "You just get different versions at different times."

We paid for our food—splitting the bill after a brief, good-natured argument about who owed whom—and made our way out of the café together. The evening had settled over the city, the air soft and cool with approaching night.

At the corner where we'd have to go different directions, we stopped.

"Thank you," Nut said. "For telling me. For trusting me with something that mattered."

"Thank you for not running away screaming."

"I would never." His expression softened. "Well, maybe if there were spiders involved. But not for this. Never for this."

I snorted, despite myself. "Duly noted."

He took a step closer—close enough that I could see the way the streetlight caught in his eyes. Close enough that my heart did that uncomfortable thing again, the skip-beat-skip that seemed to happen whenever he was near.

"Can I see you again soon?" he asked. "Not for any particular reason. Just... to see you. To be with you. To figure out what this looks like when we're actually doing it instead of circling around it."

I thought about all the reasons I could say no. All the familiar fears, the well-worn excuses, the protective instincts that had kept me safe and alone for so long. And then I thought about Lego, in his pastel bedroom, telling me that I deserved to be known.

"Yes," I said. "You can see me again soon."

The smile that broke across his face was worth every moment of terror I'd felt getting here.

"I'll hold you to that."

"I'm counting on it."

The walk home was quiet, but not lonely. I moved through the evening streets with something new humming in my chest—not quite happiness, not quite relief, but something in between. Something that felt like the beginning of a story I'd been too scared to start.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, expecting Nut, and found Lego instead.

Lego: How did it go??

I smiled at the familiar emojis—flowers and snails, the particular language he'd developed for our conversations.

Hong: Good. Really good, actually.

Lego: REALLY?!

Lego: Tell me everything!!

Lego: Wait no, tell me in person. I want to see your face.

Lego: Can you come over? I made cookies. They're shaped like stars.

Hong: It's almost 9pm.

Lego: Star cookies don't have a curfew.

I laughed out loud, the sound escaping into the evening air.

Hong: Fine. But only because of the cookies.

I changed direction, heading toward Lego's apartment instead of my own house. There would be cookies and tea and a friend who would listen while I processed what had just happened. There would be stuffed animals watching from every surface and the particular comfort of a space designed for softness.

And there would be the growing certainty that I wasn't carrying this alone anymore.

Lego had been right. I deserved to be known.

And Nut—patient, persistent, impossibly understanding Nut—had made that possible.

For the first time in longer than I could remember, the future didn't look like something to survive. It looked like something to explore.

And I was finally ready to see where it led.